DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 802 CS 213 062

AUTHOR Gibson, Walker; Lutz, William
TITLE Doublespeak: A Brief History, Definition, and Bibliography, with a List of Award Winners, 1974-1990. NCTE Concept Paper Series. Concept Paper No. 2.
INSTITUTION National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 48p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801 (Stock No. 12277).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - General (020) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Language Role; *Language Usage; Lying; Persuasive Discourse
IDENTIFIERS *Doublespeak; Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

Defining doublespeak as language which pretends to communicate but really does not, this concept paper contains two essays, the first an introduction to doublespeak by Walker Gibson, which offers information on the formation and activities of the 36-member Committee on Public Doublespeak, and considers the history and nature of doublespeak. The second essay, "Notes toward a Definition of Doublespeak (Revised)," by William Lutz, outlines four kinds of doublespeak (euphemism, jargon, bureaucratese, and inflated language), and provides examples. The paper also includes a 28-item selected bibliography, a list of Doublespeak Award winners from 1974 to 1990 explaining reasons for the award and giving examples, and a list of the George Orwell winners from 1975 to 1990. (RS)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED337802

# NCTE Concept Papers

Concept Paper No. 2

## Doublespeak: A brief history, definition, and bibliography, with a list of award winners, 1974-1990

Walker Gibson, University of Massachusetts--Amherst
William Lutz, Rutgers University--New Brunswick

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J Maxwell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS213062

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

**NCTE**
**Concept Paper Series**

Concept Paper No. 2

# Doublespeak: A brief history, definition, and bibliography, with a list of award winners, 1974-1990

Walker Gibson, University of Massachusetts--Amherst
William Lutz, Rutgers University--New Brunswick

Copyright 1991 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved. Direct reprint requests to the Copyright Clearance Center; 27 Congress Street; Salem MA 01970.

It is the policy of NCTE in its publications to provide a forum for open discussion of ideas concerning the content and teaching of English and the language arts. Publicity accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by the NCTE Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, or the membership at large.

NCTE Editorial Board: Richard Abrahamson, Celia Genishi, Joyce Kinkead, Louise W. Phelps, Gladys Veidemanis, *ex officio*: Charles Suhor, Michael Spooner

NCTE Stock Number 12277

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana IL 61801

Contents

Page

An Introduction to Doublespeak (Walker Gibson) 5

Notes Toward a Description of Doublespeak (Revised)--
(William Lutz) 17

Selected Bibliography--(William Lutz) 26

Doublespeak Award Winner, 1974-1990 30

Orwell Award Winners, 1975-1990 44

Acknowledgments

"Notes Toward a Description of Doublespeak" by William Lutz appeared in a slightly different form in Quarterly Review of Doublespeak, vol. 13, no. 2, 1987. The list of Doublespeak Award and Orwell Award winners was compiled by Diane Allen, NCTE Public Relations Associate.

# AN INTRODUCTION TO DOUBLESPEAK

by Walker Gibson

"That's the trouble with you English teachers," somebody said. "You don't know very much about sin."

We were in Las Vegas, several thousand of us, attending the NCTE convention of 1971, and maybe somebody was right. We English teachers wandered through those huge dim casinos in a state somewhere between shock and exhilaration. If you stuck a quarter in a slot machine, a young woman in a very short skirt immediately appeared, offering a drink on the house. I mean, that's sin!

Still, the convention lumbered on, as it always does, and work got done. As incoming president of the Council that year, I checked in at various meetings, including that of the Resolutions Committee, chaired by Richard Ohmann of Wesleyan University. Dick was looking cheerful. "We've got some dandy resolutions for you," he announced. I knew that Ohmann, with a long history of activism behind him (and ahead of him), would come up with something important and provocative. But I couldn't have guessed what a significant and long-lasting enterprise for English teaching his resolutions were to set in motion.

Among the proposals presented at the convention's business meeting, then, a day or so later, were those two devoted to what later became

doublespeak. (The Resolutions people were calling it "Public Lying.") No doubt the sinful Las Vegas ambience had something to do with this new focus on sinfulness in language.

Omitting the elaborate "Whereases," here is the way the two resolutions read:

> RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English find means to study dishonest and inhumane uses of language and literature by advertisers, to bring offenses to public attention, and to propose techniques for preparing children to cope with commercial propaganda.
>
> RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English find means to study relations of language to public policy, to keep track of, publicize, and combat semantic distortion by public officials, candidates for office, political commentators, and all those who transmit through the mass media.

The business meeting was understandably divided about these unconventional proposals. There were those who didn't think this was the sort of thing English teachers should be doing at all. The meeting was not very well attended, and I remember thinking gratefully that a lot of people who might be opposed were out in the lobbies at the slot machines. Finally, and without amendment, the two resolutions were passed. Then it was up to the

Executive Committee, as always, to decide what action to take.

If the Council's business meeting was divided or perplexed by these resolutions, the Executive Committee, meeting in Minneapolis the following February, was even more so. Public Lying? That was putting it a bit strongly, some members felt, and perhaps implied a more aggressive and thoroughgoing attack than we were prepared to take on. The formation of a committee to look into all this was duly authorized, but nobody could figure out what to call it.

In May the Executives met again, in Chicago, and this time the fledgling operation finally got a name: Committee on Public Doublespeak. My memory is that it was Virginia Reid of California who hit on this solution. It is of course a corruption of two terms from Orwell, Doublethink and Newspeak. There have been times when some have wondered whether doublespeak is the perfect label, but it has stood for twenty years now and it will have to do.

The first meeting of the newly-named committee took place at the November (1972) convention in Minneapolis, and a pretty pitiful little gathering it was. Dick Ohmann and I were there, and just three others. But one of the others was an enthusiast, Hugh Rank of Governors State University in Illinois, and we promptly voted him into the chair. Rank was an extremely hard-working and imaginative chairman during his short term in office. For instance, for our next national convention in Philadelphia, he organized an "Insiders' Tour" to Washington to find out what really goes on linguistically in the halls of power. (As one member of that group happily told me, on his

return to Philadelphia, "we were lied to steadily for three days.") This adventure produced one of the first notices of the committee's work in the national press, an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education. Rank also compiled mountains of materials on language pollution, increased the committee's membership, and planned a number of publications for teachers. For all this he was rewarded with a series of heart attacks and had to relinquish the chair late in 1973, doublespeak clearly being a hard taskmaster. Hugh Rank wonderfully recovered, however, and he remains to this day one of the committee's busiest members, having produced several down-to-earth publications, particularly on advertising, directed to practical classroom use.

Rank was succeeded by Dan Dieterich, who at that time was a member of the NCTE Urbana staff and therefore well placed to continue the committee's growth and development. Meanwhile, during the summer of 1973, we had enjoyed the sensational experience of the Watergate hearings, abruptly bringing political doublespeak right into everyone's living room. The vagueness and the evasive euphemizing of the witnesses were a striking lesson to us all. Those witnesses never reported that anyone said anything, they testified that someone indicated something. An act clearly against the law was called inappropriate. It was during those hearings that we became freshly aware of the way in which the passive voice of the verb can be employed to avoid responsibility. "A meeting was called and it was decided that ..." said Attorney General Mitchell. Who called it? Who decided?

The most conspicuous public notice that the Doublespeak Committee received during this period occurred in December, just after the Philadelphia convention. It was in the form of an editorial in The New York Times that was downright lyrical: "relevant teaching at its best," "acting in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson." The record of the Times on linguistic matters is mixed, to say the least; every lover of dictionaries remembers the misguided editorial attack on Webster's Third Unabridged back in 1961. But in this case the Times was right on target.

The editorial mentions a plan to make "an annual Orwellian award to the worst example of doublespeak." The first such award was conferred at the 1974 convention, an "ironic tribute" to the most outrageous example of doublespeak over the preceding year. Ever since, this award has brought us renewed attention from the press, and no wonder, since journalists are more familiar than most of us with the chicanery of public pronouncements. The "winner" of that first award remains dear to me personally because that was the only time a nomination of my own was endorsed by the committee. The hero in this case was a colonel for public relations in the Air Force in Southeast Asia. It seems that in a pique of impatience with reporters on the scene, he called them in and chewed them out. "You keep saying it's bombing, bombing, bombing," he told them. "It's not bombing, it's air support." This sample may have an over-familiar or archaic sound to it now, after twenty years of additional doubletalk from the armed forces. It wasn't the first time nor the last that the military has attempted to euphemize its business--i.e., death

and destruction--with some softening label. We recall Orwell again, writing half a century ago: "Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: This is called pacification." Amazing that that very word resurfaced during the Vietnam years, with exactly the same intention to mislead.

(For a more recent example of disguising military aggression as something more acceptable, consider our invasion of Panama in 1989. The official name of this venture was Operation Just Cause--a name that can give us some insight into the way doublespeak from powerful places often works. When you call it "Just Cause" before the troops have set forth, you have effectually shut off debate, or tried to. Is it a just cause? Well, that's what it's called, officially, so that's what it must be. Right?)

In any event it seems likely that no single activity of English teachers has ever aroused such attention nationally as the annual Doublespeak Award. Some have felt that the publicity has distracted attention from other activities of the Council, possibly more educationally important and effective. There is also some sense that the award is too negative, essentially a carping or complaining affair. No doubt there is some justice in these reservations, but it's important to note that the Doublespeak Committee is also engaged in enterprises that are decidedly affirmative. The annual Orwell Award, for example, is presented to the author of a work "which has made an outstanding contribution to the critical analysis of public

discourse." This recognition has taken place annually since 1975 to reward a number of books on advertising, the mass media, politics, etc. And members of the committee, as the bibliography in these pages will show, have created a large number of works for teachers, from Hugh Rank's classroom exercises to William Lutz's recent, ambitious and definitive volume, Doublespeak (Harper & Row, 1989). The Committee has also collected and sponsored a number of essay anthologies, of which a recent example, edited by Lutz, is Beyond 1984: Doublespeak in a Post-Orwellian Age (NCTE, 1989). As for more modest materials for immediate classroom use, those of us who have served in the doublespeak booth at our annual conventions know how eagerly teachers at all levels will seize and take home the various handouts we have to offer.

An important appeal in at least some of these materials is that often they are plain funny. There is a humorous side to much doublespeak, and one of our first impulses is to laugh. How could anyone imagine getting away with such willful manipulation of words? When current chair Bill Lutz makes his presentation each November before NCTE's Board of Directors, he begins by making the most of the comic side of the subject, as he should. "It was a very good year for doublespeak," he will intone, and then list, to much laughter, a number of hilarious examples which are really not a lot more than that--hilarious examples. "We learned this year that in today's schools students don't just misbehave, they 'engage in negative attention-getting.' We learned also that nudism is 'clothing-optional recreation' and sewage sludge is 'organic biomass.' Wood is 'three-dimensional biopolymer

composites' and vinyl is 'vegetarian leather.' But as Lutz knows as well as anybody, the comedy is short-lived, and as he approaches the winning entries his tone becomes appropriately accusatory. When the Exxon Company calls the beaches of Alaska "environmentally clean," it's time to stop laughing and get angry.

A list of doublespeak "winners" appears elsewhere in this Concept Paper. A review of some recent ones can be revealing. In addition to the Exxon Company (1989) and George Bush (1990), awards have gone to Oliver North and John Poindexter, the CIA, the Department of State under Reagan, Reagan himself (twice), and the Republican National Committee. A disinterested observer might question whether there's some evidence here of the political persuasion of committee members who made these choices. After all, we all know that Democrats and liberals are quite likely to be guilty of misleading uses of language--not to mention doctors and lawyers and (certainly!) English teachers. Where are these people on the list of winners? But I think the explanation of consistent Republican winners has to be more complex than any possible political bias on the part of the committee. The fact may be that during the dozen years of Reagan and Bush administrations we have been subjected to increasingly contemptuous attitudes toward verbal decency. The awards serve the purpose of saying that these attitudes on the part of persons in power are contemptible as well.

Bill Lutz assumed the chairship of the committee in 1979, and his term in office has seen a steady increase in the committee's activity. Our lively

but modest newsletter, originally edited by Francine Hardaway and Don L.F. Nilson of Arizona, became in 1980 the Quarterly Review of Doublespeak, edited by Lutz himself. This publication is filled with current doublespeak samples, from the frivolous to the horrific, as well as short articles, cartoons, and book reviews. The journal's popular success has been impressive. Circulation is now around 5,000 subscribers, from 50 states and 23 foreign countries. (Send your check for $8 a year to NCTE in Urbana.)

The committee itself numbers at this writing 36 members, all of whom are active in the sense that they participate at least in the voting for our two awards. In addition, members are expected to be on the alert for fresh samples for QRD, and are further expected to contribute articles and reviews to that journal. NCTE members willing to take on these responsibilities, and ready to join, should apply to Bill Lutz at Rutgers University, Camden NJ 08102.

**********

The doublespeak enterprise, along with many other activities of English teachers, is predicated on two related assertions: that language is created by human beings and that words are not things. These two propositions have been in the air for a very long time, at least as far back as the pre-Socratic philosophers of the 4th century BC. Here for example is the rhetorician Gorgias: "The means by which we indicate is speech, and speech is not

identical with the things that are spoken about. Therefore what we indicate to the person whom we address is not existing things but merely speech, which is something different." And Gorgias' contemporary Protagoras is remembered for this famous passage: "Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, of the things that are not, that they are not." (That sentence is apparently the opener of a book-length document long since disappeared. One would give a lot to know what happened in that book after that opening sentence.) Reality, to these thinkers, was a relative matter and always dependent on the human observer. We understand reality by studying human efforts to describe it, and things are in constant flux as our estimates change. To a modern or postmodern mind this may seem reasonable enough, but it was all immediately discredited, 2300 years ago, by Plato. Very well, said Plato, have it your way, the things we see are not necessarily real, and our human perceptions and language are intrinsically limited. But never mind (said Plato), above and beyond our little world that changes before our eyes, there are Eternal Forms which are the unchanging real reality. "God made one (ideal) bed, and one only," Socrates affirms in The Republic. From Eternal Forms somewhere on high, it was only a step to the Word of God, Divine Rights, Absolute Truth, and other absurdities that have plagued us for the past two thousand years. The thrust of Plato's thought was to persuade us that somewhere there are words (forms) that do represent truth, eternal and undying. That foolish notion has caused great human misery.

For people in power, the temptation to believe that they are in touch

with Platonic Forms appears to be irresistible. The rest of us require a defensive strategy. We must not approach the words of the powerful as if in any way they represented truth--what we must do is recognize that their words too are human inventions which merit, which require our critical attention, especially as to motive. Most of our doublespeak cases are obvious. What appears to be bombing, somebody calls air support, and that person's motives are pretty clear. Colonel North called those rebel Nicaraguans "Freedom Fighters" and we all know why he did that. Any young persons so naive as to think of themselves as members of the Pepsi Generation ought to ask how and why that phrase got invented. But when we realize (with Protagoras and Gorgias) that all language (including this sentence) is open to this sort of challenge, then we are possibly on our way out of the woods.

Postmodernists define reality as social negotiation. That would have been congenial to pre-Socratic philosophers. As for the gods on high, Protagoras had a sensible comment. "I have no way of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist; nor, if they exist, of what form they are. For the obstacles to that sort of knowledge are many, including the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life." His remark is charmingly understated. "That sort of knowledge" indeed! He knew that that sort of knowledge is forever beyond human possibility. And yet for two thousand years and more we have been made miserable by people who laid claims to "that sort of knowledge." The Holy Roman Empire and the Only Church. In God We Trust. Operation Just Cause. The Pepsi Generation. Are we finally coming to our

senses? Reality is a matter of social negotiation, not authoritarian decree. And to end on a patriotic note: it's hard to imagine a program on doublespeak flourishing for very long in any society but a democracy.

We can think of our modest doublespeak campaign, I believe, as part of a much larger 20th-century intellectual development that is profoundly liberating. It's a matter of recognizing that words do not express what the world is, they express what somebody says the world is. And often enough, what somebody says is open to challenge.

# NOTES TOWARD A DESCRIPTION OF DOUBLESPEAK (REVISED)

by William Lutz

The word "doublespeak" combines the meanings of "newspeak" and "doublethink." Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but really does not. It is language which makes the bad seem good, something negative appear positive, and something unpleasant appear attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids or shifts responsibility, language which is at variance with its real meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought. Doublespeak is language which does not extend thought but limits it.

## How to Analyze Language for Doublespeak

In his essay "The Teacher-Heal-Thyself Myth" (*Language and Public Policy*, NCTE, 1974), Hugh Rank has written that identifying doublespeak requires an analysis of language "in context with the whole situation" in which the language occurs: "who is saying what to whom, under what conditions and circumstances, with what intent and with what results" (p. 219). According to Edward P.J. Corbett, his method of identifying doublespeak "encapsulates the whole art of rhetoric and provides a set of criteria to help us discriminate those uses of language that we should proscribe and those that we should encourage" (*English Journal 65* [1976]: 16-17). Applying this method of analysis to language will identify doublespeak in uses of language which might otherwise be legitimate or which might not even appear at first glance to be

doublespeak.

**First Kind of Doublespeak**

There are at least four kinds of doublespeak. The first kind of doublespeak is the *euphemism*. A euphemism is a word or phrase that is designed to avoid a harsh or distasteful reality. When a euphemism is used out of sensitivity for the feelings of someone or out of concern for a social or cultural taboo, it is not doublespeak. For example, we express grief that someone has "passed away" because we do not want to say to a grieving person, "I'm sorry your father is dead." The euphemism "passed away" functions here not just to protect the feelings of another person but to communicate also our concern over that person's feelings during a period of mourning.

However, when a euphemism is used to mislead or deceive it becomes doublespeak. For example, the U.S. State Department decided in 1984 that in its annual reports on the status of human rights in countries around the world it would no longer use the word "killing." Instead, it would use the phrase "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life," a phrase which the State Department claimed was more accurate. Thus, the State Department would avoid discussing the embarrassing situation of government-sanctioned killings in countries which are supported by the United States. This use of language constitutes doublespeak since it is designed to mislead, to cover up the unpleasant. Its real intent is at variance with its apparent intent. It is

language designed to alter our perception of reality.

**Second Kind of Doublespeak**

A second kind of doublespeak is *jargon*, the specialized language of a trade, profession, or similar group. It is the specialized language of doctors, lawyers, engineers, educators, or car mechanics. Jargon can serve an important and useful function. Within a group, jargon allows members of the group to communicate with each other clearly, efficiently, and quickly. Indeed, it is a mark of membership in the group to be able to use and understand the group's jargon. For example, lawyers will speak of an "involuntary conversion" of property when discussing the loss or destruction of property through theft, accident, or condemnation. When used by lawyers in a legal situation, such jargon is a legitimate use of language since all members of the group can be expected to understand the term.

However, when a member of the group uses jargon to communicate with a person outside the group, and uses it knowing that the nonmember does not understand such language, then there is doublespeak. For example, a number of years ago a commercial airliner crashed on takeoff, killing three passengers, injuring twenty-one others, and destroying the airplane, a 727. The insured value of the airplane was greater than its book value, so the airline made a profit of three million dollars on the destroyed airplane. But the airline had two problems: it did not want to talk about one of its airplanes

crashing, and it had to account for three million dollars when it issued its annual report to its stockholders. The airline solved these problems by inserting a footnote in its annual report which explained that this three million dollars was due to "the involuntary conversion of a 727." The term "involuntary conversion" is a technical term in law; it is legal jargon. Airplane officials could claim to have explained the crash of the airplane and the subsequent three million dollars profit. However, since most stockholders in the company, and indeed most of the general public, are not familiar with legal jargon, the use of such jargon constitutes doublespeak.

**Third Kind of Doublespeak**

A third kind of doublespeak is *gobbledygook*, or *bureaucratese*. Basically, such doublespeak is simply a matter of piling on words, of overwhelming the audience with words--the bigger the better. For example, when Alan Greenspan was chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, he made the following statement when testifying before a Senate committee: "It is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated risk premiums." Did Alan Greenspan's audience really understand what he was saying? Did he believe his statement really explained anything? Perhaps there is some meaning beneath all those words, but it would take some time to

search it out. This seems to be language which pretends to communicate but does not.

**Fourth Kind of Doublespeak**

The fourth kind of doublespeak is *inflated language*. Inflated language is language designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary; the common, uncommon. It is designed to make everyday things seem impressive; to give an air of importance to people, situations, or things which would not normally be considered important; to make the simple seem complex. With this kind of language car mechanics become automotive internists, elevator operators become members of the vertical transportation corps, used cars become not just pre-owned but "experienced" cars. When the Pentagon uses the phrase "preemptive counterattack" to mean that American forces attacked first, or when it uses the phrase "engage the enemy on all sides" to describe an ambush of American troops, or when it uses the phrase "tactical redeployment" to describe a retreat by American troops, it is using doublespeak. The electronics company which sells the television set with "non-multicolor capability" is also using the doublespeak of inflated language.

*Identifying Doublespeak*

Identifying doublespeak can at times be difficult. For example, on July 27, 1981, President Ronald Reagan said in a speech televised to the American public, "I will not stand by and see those of you who are dependent on Social Security deprived of the benefits you've worked so hard to earn. You will continue to receive your checks in the full amount due you." This speech had been billed as President Reagan's position on Social Security, a subject of much debate at the time. After the speech, public-opinion polls revealed that the great majority of the public believed that President Reagan had affirmed his support for Social Security and that he would not support cuts in benefits. However, five days after the speech, on July 31, 1981, an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* quoted White House spokesperson David Gergen as saying that President Reagan's words had been "carefully chosen." What President Reagan did mean, according to Gergen, was that he was reserving the right to decide who was "dependent" on those benefits, who had "earned" them, and who, therefore, was "due" them.

David Gergen's remarks revealed the real intent of President Reagan as opposed to his apparent intent. Thus, Hugh Rank's criteria for analyzing language to determine whether it is doublespeak, when applied in light of Gergen's remarks, reveal the doublespeak of President Reagan. Here is the gap between the speaker's real aim and declared aim.

*Alexander Haig and Doublespeak*

In 1981 Secretary of State Alexander Haig was testifying before congressional committees about the murder of three American nuns and a Catholic lay worker in El Salvador. The four women had been raped and then shot at close range, and there was clear evidence that the crime had been committed by soldiers of the Salvadoran government. Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Secretary Haig said, "I'd like to suggest to you that some of the investigations would lead one to believe that perhaps the vehicle the nuns were riding in may have tried to run a roadblock, or may accidentally have been perceived to have been doing so, and there'd been an exchange of fire and then perhaps those who inflicted the casualties sought to cover it up. And this could have been at a very low level of both competence and motivation in the context of the issue itself. But the facts on this are not clear enough for anyone to draw a definitive conclusion."

The next day, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Haig claimed that press reports on his previous testimony were inaccurate. When Senator Claiborne Pell asked whether Secretary Haig was suggesting the possibility that "the nuns may have run through a roadblock," Secretary Haig replied, "You mean that they tried to violate. . .? Not at all, no, not at all. My heavens! The dear nuns who raised me in my parochial schooling would forever isolate me from their affections and respect." When Senator Pell asked Secretary Haig, "Did you mean that the nuns were firing at the people,

or what did 'an exchange of fire' mean?" Secretary Haig replied, "I haven't met any pistol-packing nuns in my day, Senator. What I meant was that if one fellow starts shooting, then the next thing you know they all panic." Thus did the Secretary of State of the United States explain official government policy on the murder of four American citizens in a foreign land.

Secretary Haig's testimony implies that the women were in some way responsible for their own fate. By using such vague wording as "would lead one to believe" and "may accidentally have been perceived to have been," he avoids any direct assertion. The use of the phrase "inflicted the casualties" not only avoids using the word "kill" but also implies that at worst the killings were accidental or justifiable. The result of this testimony is that the Secretary of State has become an apologist for murder. This is indeed the kind of language Orwell said is used in defense of the indefensible. It is language designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and language designed to give pure wind an appearance of solidity.

**Doublespeak and Clear Thinking**

These last examples of doublespeak should make it clear that doublespeak is not the product of careless language or sloppy thinking. Indeed, most doublespeak is the product of clear thinking and is language carefully designed and constructed to appear to communicate when in fact it doesn't. It is language designed not to lead but mislead. It is language designed to

distort reality and corrupt the mind. A tax increase isn't a tax increase but "revenue enhancement" or "tax base broadening," so how can you complain about higher taxes? It's not acid rain; it's "poorly buffered precipitation," so don't worry about all those dead trees. That isn't the Mafia in Atlantic City; those are just "members of a career offender cartel," so don't worry about the influence of organized crime in the city. The Supreme Court justice wasn't addicted to the pain-killing drug he was taking; the drug had simply "established an interrelationship with the body such that if the drug is removed precipitously there is a reaction," so don't worry that his decisions might have been influenced by his drug addiction. It's not a Titan II nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile with a warhead 630 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima; it's just a "very large, potentially disruptive re-entry system," so don't worry about the threat of nuclear destruction. It's not a neutron bomb but a "radiation enhancement device," so don't worry about escalating the arms race. It's not an invasion but a "rescue mission" or a "predawn vertical insertion," so don't worry about any violations of United States or international law.

I hope these revised categories of doublespeak will provide a way of thinking about, identifying, and analyzing doublespeak. Those who have other categories, or who find my discussion here inadequate, are welcome--even encouraged--to submit their own descriptions or definitions of doublespeak.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY ON DOUBLESPEAK

Bok, Sisela. Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Bolinger, Dwight. Language: The Loaded Weapon. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1980.

Bolinger, Dwight. "Truth Is a Linguistic Question." Language 49 (1973): 539-50.

Bosmajian, Haig. The Language of Oppression. University Press of America, 1983.

Chilton, Paul, and Crispin Aubrey, eds. Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984. London: Comedia, 1984.

Corcoran, Paul E. Political Language and Rhetoric. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979.

Engle, S. Morris. The Language Trap, or How To Defend Yourself Against the Tyranny of Words. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984.

Enright, D. J., ed. Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Hayakawa, S. I. Language in Thought and Action. 5th ed. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.

Howe, Irving, ed. Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism. 2nd ed. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Johannesen, Richard L. Ethics in Human Communications, 3rd ed. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1990.

Kahane, Howard. Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric: The Use of Reason in Everyday Life, 5th ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1988.

Lee, Alfred McClung and Elizabeth McClung Lee. The Fine Art of Propaganda. International Society for General Semantics, 1972.

Lewis, Flossie. The Involuntary Conversion of a 727, or Crash! Some Ways and Means to Deflate the Inflated Style with a New Look at Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." Bay Area Writing Project (5635 Tolman Hall, Univ. of Calif., Berkeley), 1979.

Lutz, William, ed. Beyond Nineteen Eighty-Four: Doublespeak in a Post-Orwellian Age. National Council of Teachers of English, 1989.

Lutz, William. Doublespeak: From Revenue Enhancement to Terminal Living--How Government, Business, Advertisers, and Others Use Language to Deceive You. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

Orwell, George. Nineteen Eighty-Four. New York: New American Library, 1961.

Orwell, George. Politics and the English Language. In In Front of Your Nose (1945-1950), 127-40, Vol. 4 of The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952. Reprint. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1968.

Postman, Neil. Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business. New York: Elizabeth Sifton/Viking, 1985.

Postman, Neil. Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk. New York: Dell, 1976.

Quarterly Review of Doublespeak. $8.00 (US) per year. National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

Rank, Hugh. The Pep Talk: How to Analyze Political Language. Counter-Propaganda Press (Box 365, Park Forest South, IL 60466), 1984.

Rank, Hugh. The Pitch: How To Analyze Ads. Counter-Propaganda Press, 1982.

Rasberry, Robert W. The "Technique" of Political Lying. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1981.

Ricks, Christopher, and Leonard Michaels, eds. The State of the Language. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990.

Rothwell, J. Dan. Telling It Like It Isn't: Language Misuse and Malpractice--What We Can Do About It. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982.

Vertergaard, Torben, and Kim Schroder. The Language of Advertising. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985.

Wise, David. The Politics of Lying. New York: Random House, 1973.

**Doublespeak Award Winners, 1974-1990**

**NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak**

1990 President George Bush

For using public language to waffle and obscure his intentions on various issues: taxes, maternity and caregiving leave for mothers, preservation of wetlands, high-level exchanges with Chinese officials following the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the U.S. invasion of Panama.

Examples: (1-a) "No new taxes"; (1-b) "tax revenue increases." (2-a) "We . . . need to assure that women do not have to worry about getting their jobs back after having a child or caring for a child during a serious illness." (2-b) veto of the Parental and Medical Leave bill: White House statement: the President "has always been opposed to the federal government mandating what every business in this country should do."

(3) Doublespeak to avoid the term "invasion" with reference to Panama: "Operation Just Cause"; "directed our armed forces to protect the lives of American citizens in Panama"; "deployed forces" to Panama; conducted "efforts to support the democratic processes in Panama"; assured "the integrity of the Panama Canal", etc.

1989 The Exxon Corporation

For calling some 35 miles of Alaskan beaches "environmentally clean" and "environmentally stabilized." In his announcement speech, Doublespeak Committee Chair William Lutz noted that various major news media subsequently reported the visible presence of oil along the coast in the area where the supertanker Exxon Valdez ran aground March 24, 1989.

The Philadelphia Inquirer (May 26) reported that beaches declared by Exxon to be clean or stabilized were still covered with oil. . . . Wipe any stone and come away with a handful of oil. Newsweek (Sept. 18) reported that in the

spill area "the rocks were gritty, sticky, and dark brown. . . ." Lutz noted Exxon spokespersons' gradual shift from calling beaches "clean" to calling them "treated" [so that] "the natural inhabitants can live there without harm."

1988 Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci, Admiral William Crowe, and Rear Admiral William Fogarty

For language used to explain the downing of Iran Air Flight 655 by the U.S. cruiser Vincennes in the Persion Gulf July 3. Doublespeak Committee Chair William Lutz cited Secretary Carlucci, Admiral Crowe, and Rear Admiral Fogarty for language used in the report on the incident and for comments made in the August 19 news conference held to release and discuss the report. Admiral Fogarty is the author of the report, titled Formal Investigation into the Circumstances Surrounding the Downing of Iran Air Flight 655 on July 3, 1988.

In his award announcement speech, Lutz said, "The language used in the official report and the language used during the press conference

was filled with the doublespeak of omission, distortion, contradiction, and misdirection. One reporter called the report an 'enormous jigsaw puzzle with key pieces missing.' In addition to censoring essential information, such as the names of almost all the participants . . . the report also lacks any original source information such as statements by participants and any of the data recorded by the ship's computers."

Lutz noted that at the news conference, Admiral Crowe said that "a number of mistakes were made," by the crew of the Vincennes and admitted that "some of the information given to Captain Rogers during the engagement proved not to be accurate." Nevertheless Secretary Carlucci was quoted as saying, ". . . these errors or mistakes were not crucial" to the decision to shoot the airliner down. Lutz quoted Admiral Crowe as claiming that "to say there were errors made . . . is not necessarily to suggest culpability."

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1987 | Lt. Col. Oliver North and Rear Admiral John Poindexter | For language used in testifying before the congressional Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition: excerpts from numerous examples, as presented in Doublespeak Committee Chair William Lutz's announcement speech: |

Lutz said, "Colonel North used the words 'residuals' and 'diversions' to refer to the millions of dollars of profits . . . created by overcharging Iran for arms so that the money could be used to finance the Contras. . . . (North) also said that he 'cleaned things up,' he was 'cleaning up the historical record,' . . . meaning he lied, destroyed official government documents, and created false documents. . . . 'Director Casey and I fixed that testimony and removed the offensive portions. We fixed it by omission.' Official lies," Lutz observed, "were 'plausible deniability.'"

According to Poindexter's testimony, Lutz said, "one does not lie but 'misleads' or 'withholds information.' . . . In Poindexter's world," Lutz noted, "one can 'acquiesce' in a shipment of weapons while at the same time not authorize the shipment. One can transfer millions of dollars of government money as a 'technical implementation' without making a 'substantive decision.' . . . Yet Poindexter can protest that it is not 'fair to say that I have misinformed Congress or other Cabinet officers. . . . With regard to the Cabinet officers, I didn't withhold anything from them that they didn't want withheld from them.'"

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1986 | Officials of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Morton Thiokol, and Rockwell International | For comments made following the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, among them: NASA official on whether shuttle performance had improved: I think our performance in terms of the orbital performance, we knew more about the envelope we were operating under, and we have |

been pretty accurately staying in that. . . . I think we have been able to characterize the performance more as a function of our launch experience as opposed to it improving as a function of time."

NASA also described the shuttle explosion as "an anomaly," and the bodies of the astronauts as "recovered components," and the astronauts' coffins as "crew transfer containers."

Morton Thiokol engineer on effect of cold weather: "I made the comment that lower temperatures are in the direction of badness for both O-rings, because it slows down the timing function."

Rockwell executive on ice formation on the launch platform: "I felt that by telling them we did not have a sufficient data base and could not analyze the trajectory of the ice, I felt he understood that Rockwell was not giving a positive indication we were for the launch."

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1985 | The Central Intelligence Agency | For its "Psychological Warfare Manual," prepared for rebels fighting the government of Nicaragua. Doublespeak Committee Chair William Lutz quoted news reports in which CIA Director William Casey said the manual's purpose was "to make every guerilla persuasive in face-to-face communication" and to develop "political awareness," and insisted that the manual's "emphasis is on education. . . ." The CIA manual, Lutz noted, "gave advice on the 'selective use of violence' to 'neutralize' Nicaraguan officials, such as judges, police, and state security officials. . . ." |
| 1984 | U.S. State Department | For announcing that it will no longer use the word "killing" in official reports on the status of human rights in other countries, but will replace "killing" with the phrase "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life." Also (after the U.S. invasion of Grenada) for stating that U.S. and Caribbean occupation forces were not arresting Grenadians and others suspected of |

opposing the invasion. "We are detaining people," a State Department official said. "They should be described as detainees."

1983 President Ronald Reagan — For calling the MX intercontinental ballistic missile "Peacekeeper," for commenting that "a vote against MX production today is a vote against arms control tomorrow," and for the following statement to deputies of the Costa Rican National Assembly, condemning secret military operations: "Any nation destabilizing its neighbors by protecting guerillas and exporting violence should forfeit close and fruitful relations with any people who truly love peace and freedom."

Doublespeak Committee Chair William Lutz said, "Subsequent news reports revealed that the United States, through the CIA, was recruiting, arming, equipping, training, and directing" what have been described as "clandestine military operations against Nicaragua."

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1982 | Republican National Committee | For its television commercial crediting President Reagan for a cost-of-living hike in Social Security benefits that in fact stemmed from a pre-Reagan law. The director of communications for the Republican committee responded to the award by saying, "Perhaps they and our children would be better off if they spent more time teaching English and less time engaging in cheap, political demagoguery." |
| 1981 | Alexander Haig, Secretary of State | For a series of statements made to Congressional committees about the murder of three American nuns and a religious lay worker in El Salvador |
| 1980 | President-elect Ronald Reagan | For campaign oratory "filled with inaccurate assertions and statistics and misrepresentations of his past record." The Los Angeles Times and Time magazine listed some 18 untrue or inaccurate public statements by Mr. Reagan. As the New York Times noted, Mr. Reagan "doesn't let the truth spoil a good anecdote or effective symbol. . . . Mr. Reagan's speeches are peppered with . . . omissions, exaggerations and |

reinterpretations of his experience as Governor of California and as a candidate." Mr. Reagan, for example, mentioned that he refunded $5.7 billion in property taxes to Californians. But he never mentioned that as Governor he raised taxes by a total of $21 billion. He also claimed that General Motors "has to employ 23,300 fulltime employees to comply with government-required paperwork." A GM executive pointed out, however, that the firm has only 4,900 persons to do all its paperwork. And even after it was disproved, Mr. Reagan continued to claim that Alaska has more oil than Saudi Arabia. (From remarks by William Lutz, 1980 chair, Committee on Public Doublespeak.)

1979 The nuclear power industry

"For inventing a whole lexicon of jargon and euphemisms used before, during, and after the Three Mile Island accident and serving to downplay the dangers of nuclear accidents. An explosion is called 'energetic disassembly' and a fire, 'rapid oxidation.' A reactor accident is an 'event,' an 'incident,' an 'abnormal

evolution,' a 'normal aberration' or a 'plant transient.' Plutonium contamination is 'infiltration,' or 'plutonium has taken up residence.'" -- William Lutz, 1979 chair, Committee on Public Doublespeak.

1978 Earl Clinton Bolton

A memorandum written by Bolton for the CIA in 1968 and recently declassified, entitled, "Agency-Academic Relations," began by suggesting that those assisting the agency "may be on the defensive." The memo advises academics to defend themselves by explaining their CIA involvement "as a contribution to . . . proper academic goals. . . . It should be stressed that when an apologia is necessary it can best be made: (1) by some distant academic who is not under attack, (2) in a 'respectable' publication of general circulation (e.g., Harper's, Saturday Review, Vital Speeches, etc.) and (3) with full use of the jargon of the academy (as illustrated below). . . . Two doctrines fiercely protected by the academy are 'academic freedom' and 'privilege and tenure.' . . . When attacked for

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | aiding the Agency the academic (or institution) should base a rejoinder on these sacred doctrines." Bolton concludes by encouraging the Agency to "have an insulator such as RAND or IDA. Such entities have quite good acceptance in academia. . . . Such an independent corporation should of course have a ringing name (e.g., Institute for a Free Society) . . ." |
| 1977 | The Pentagon and the Energy Research and Development Administration | In explaining qualities of the neutron bomb: "an efficient nuclear weapon that eliminates an enemy with a minimum degree of damage to friendly territory." |
| 1976 | The State Department | The Department's announcement of plans to appoint a consumer affairs coordinator said the coordinator would: "review existing mechanisms of consumer input, thruput, and output, and seek ways of improving these linkages via the 'consumer communication channel.'" |
| 1975 | Yasir Arafat, PLO Leader | In answer to a charge that the PLO wanted to destroy Israel, he was quoted as saying, "They |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | are wrong. We do not want to destroy any people. It is precisely because we have been advocating coexistence that we have shed so much blood." |
| 1974 | Colonel David H.E. Opfer, USAF Press Officer in Cambodia | After a U.S. bombing raid, he told some reporters: "You always write it's bombing, bombing, bombing. It's <u>not</u> bombing! It's air support!" |

**Orwell Award Winners, 1975-1990**

**(George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contributions to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1990 | Charlotte Baecher, Consumers Union | Selling America's Kids: Commercial Pressures on Kids of the 90's |
| 1989 | Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky | Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media |
| 1988 | Donald Bartlett and James Steele, Philadelphia Inquirer | For a series of articles on the Tax Reform Act in which they pointed out language disguising tax loopholes in the legislation |
| 1987 | Noam Chomsky | On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures |
| 1986 | Neil Postman | Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business |
| 1985 | Torben Vestergaard and Kim Schroder | The Language of Advertising |
| 1984 | Ted Koppel, | ". . . a model of intelligence, informed |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | moderator, "Nightline," ABC-TV | interest, social awareness, verbal fluency, fair and rigorous questioning of controversial figures. . . . [who has sought] honesty and openness, clarity and coherence, to raise the level of public discourse."--William Lutz, chair, NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak |
| 1983 | Haig Bosmajian | The Language of Oppression |
| 1982 | Stephen Hilgartner, Richard C. Bell and Rory O'Connor | Nukespeak: Nuclear Language, Visions, and Mindset |
| 1981 | Dwight Bolinger | Language--The Loaded Weapon |
| 1980 | Sheila Harty | Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools |
| 1979 | Erving Goffman | Gender Advertisements |
| 1978 | Sissela Bok | Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life |
| 1977 | Walter Pincus, | "A patient, methodical journalist who knew his |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Washington Post | job and who knew the jargon of Washington. Mr. Pincus was the man responsible for bringing to public attention, and thus to a debate in the Senate, the appropriations funding for the neutron bomb."--Hugh Rank, chair, NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak |
| 1976 | Hugh Rank | "Intensify/Downplay" schema for analyzing communication, persuasion, and propaganda |
| 1975 | David Wise | The Politics of Lying |

## NCTE Concept Paper Series

NCTE's series of *Concept Papers* was established to present innovative thinking about the field of English language arts education in a relatively informal, quickly produced format. Designed for works that are too long for publication in professional journals, but still much shorter than standard monographs, *Concept Papers* explore theoretical and practical issues in English literacy education at all teaching levels.

***NCTE Concept Papers available***

1. *Guidelines for Judging and Selecting Language Arts Textbooks: A Modest Proposal*; Timothy Shanahan, Lester Knight, et al.
2. *Doublespeak: A brief history, definition, and bibliography, with a list of award winners, 1974-1990*; Walker Gibson and William Lutz
3. *Alternatives in Understanding and Educating Attention-Deficit Students: A Systems-Based Whole Language Perspective*; Constance Weaver
4. *A Goodly Fellowship of Writers and Readers*; Richard Lloyd-Jones